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tac air also led to the reduction of the time intervals between sets of fighters to ten minutes or less. Six FACs became the norm for the operation. Senior XXIV Corps officers frequently wanted to raise the number of FACs assigned to the Area of Operation (AO), but because of the small size of the AO, 7AF felt that six was the maximum safe number for sustained day-to-day operations.

The AO, of course, was determined by the disposition of the friendly troops on the ground. A line parallel to the AO and five miles beyond it was established as a "no bomb" line. Within this NBL, all air strikes were controlled by the Hammer FACs in their various sectors. The total area inside the NBL at its largest was less than 700 square miles. With multiple fast-moving fighters in the area, six FACs, periodic Arc Light sorties, and Army helicopters operating in the area, tight command and control procedures were required. Seventh Air Force felt that to introduce additional aircraft would have been counterproductive. Furthermore, additional FACs would not have added to the number of available tac air sorties; the area of operation just could not accommodate any more aircraft.<sup>43/</sup>

#### FORCES COMMITTED

Friendly Air. Air support for Lam Son 719 came from many different units.\* The 8th Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB), the 12th TFW at Phu Cat, and the 366th TFW at Da Nang all supplied F-4 strike sorties. The 460th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing (TRW) at Tan Son Nhut

\*Units listed here are the ones with the major supporting roles. There are many other units involved on a smaller scale.

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provided RF-4Cs for recce missions. F-100 sorties came from the 35th TFW at Phan Rang. The 1st Marine Air Wing at Da Nang launched F-4, A-4 and A-6 strikes while the Navy Carrier Task Force in the Gulf of Tonkin provided A-4, A-6, A-7 and F-4 strikes. The 56th Special Operations Wing (SOW) at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB was the source of A-1 aircraft for search and rescue. The 18th Special Operations Squadron, also at Nakhon Phanom supplied AC-119K gunships, and the 16th Special Operations Squadron at Ubon RTAFB supplied AC-130A gunships. FACs for the operation came from the 504th Tactical Air Support Group at Cam Ranh Bay through its several Tactical Air Support Squadrons. The 834th Air Division at Tan Son Nhut provided all required airlift with assigned C-130 and C-123 aircraft. The ABCCC aircraft came from the 7th Airborne Command and Control Squadron of the 432d TRW at Udorn RTAFB. The Strategic Air Command, through its 307th Strategic Wing at U-Tapao, provided B-52s and KC-135s. The VNAF provided fixed wing strike aircraft and transport helicopters from the 1st Air Division. Six VNAF Tactical Air Control Parties were established to support ARVN units.

Friendly Ground Forces. As noted earlier, the U.S. Army XXIV Corps, though not operating on the ground in Laos, did provide significant support for the RVNAF. The 108th Artillery Group provided supporting fires while the 45th Engineering Group rendered engineering support. The 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) was the units which provided all U.S. helicopter support and made it possible for the RVNAF to undertake heliborne operations. The 1st Brigade of the 5th Infantry Division (Reinforced) protected the Lam Son 719 northern flank just below the DMZ.

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The RVN I Corps main forces participating in Lam Son 719 were the 1st Airborne Division, the 1st Infantry Division, the Marine Division, the 1st Ranger Group, the 1st Armored Brigade and the 10th Engineering Group. Not all of these units were on the ground in Laos at the same time, and some of their elements did not cross the border. The maximum number of friendly maneuver and support troops in Laos at any one time was approximately 17,000.

Enemy Forces. It was estimated that the maximum number of enemy forces committed at any one time was 35,000. Of this figure, 24,000 were believed to be maneuver and combat support troops, with 11,000 being rear service personnel.<sup>44/</sup> From his B-5 front the enemy committed three infantry regiments and two artillery regiments.\* From the 70B Corps, he employed two infantry regiments from the 304th Division and three infantry regiments from the 308th Division. He also used one infantry regiment from the 320th Division and two infantry regiments from the 2d Division and at least two infantry regiments from the 324B Division. The enemy also committed an unidentified tank regiment, at least two artillery regiments not associated with any of the units already mentioned, and at least nineteen antiaircraft battalions.

\*It was difficult to determine accurately what units the enemy forces came from. Figures given here are best estimates based on various messages from General Abrams to General Clay.

## CHAPTER III

### THE CAMPAIGN

Operation Lam Son 719 began, as all planned offensives, with a deployment and build-up phase. U.S. forces were given the task of providing the logistical support and a secure rear area for the ARVN incursion forces. For the incursion to reap the benefits of tactical surprise, the preparation phase had to be executed quickly, efficiently and with a diversionary cover.

#### DEPLOYMENT OF U.S. FORCES

The First Brigade, Fifth Infantry Division (Mechanized) was given the primary combat role of providing security for the 45th Engineer Group which reconstructed Highway 9 within RVN, the fire support bases and the Khe Sanh combat support base.<sup>45/</sup>

Operation Lam Son 719 actually began at 0001H on 30 January 1971 when lead elements of the First Brigade, Fifth Infantry Division attacked west from Fire Support Base Vandegrift along Highway 9. As the Third Squadron, Fifth Cavalry advanced along the road, engineers of the 14th Engineer Battalion installed nine tactical bridges and nine culverts.<sup>46/</sup>

At 0830H, 30 January, three infantry battalions began a combat assault by helicopter into Khe Sanh.<sup>47/</sup> The assault was completed at 1530H without enemy contact. Simultaneously, the 101st Airborne Division (AML) conducted diversionary moves from FSB Bastogne to FSB Veghel then to FSB Zon, from

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which heavy artillery fire was directed into the A Shau Valley. Tactical air strikes and B-52 strikes supported these maneuvers.

By 1230H on 31 January Route 9 was open from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh for tracked vehicles and lightweight wheeled vehicles.<sup>48/</sup> The Task Force moved on towards the Laotian border, reaching it at 0800H on 3 February 1971.<sup>49/</sup> The First Brigade then sent armor and infantry task forces on sweeps to the north of Route 9 and south of Khe Sanh toward the Laotian salient. The engineers continued to work on QL9 and on 31 January began the preparation of an assault airstrip at Khe Sanh to accommodate C-130 aircraft.

#### AIRLIFT EFFORT

The airlift of U.S. troops and equipment into Military Region I to provide air and ground support for the Lam Son operation began on 26 January and continued through 6 February. This deployment required 320 sorties to lift the 2031 passengers and 2541.6 short tons of cargo. The in-country C-130 fleet was augmented with ten additional aircraft from its "off-shore" wings bringing the number of C-130 aircraft in Vietnam to 58. The entire fleet was initially utilized on an around-the-clock basis when the movement of the Vietnamese contingency forces began on 30 January 1971. The movement of the ARVN 1st Airborne Division and the 258th Vietnamese Marine Brigade from Tan Son Nhut Airfield to the Military Region I bases at Dong Ha and Quang Tri occurred between 30 January and 6 February with 247 sorties airlifting 9254 passengers and 1703.5 short tons of cargo. Subsequent<sup>VID</sup> to the initial deployment of forces, airlift operations into Khe Sanh

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were conducted at the rate of 40 sorties per day during the daylight hours, lifting more than 500 short tons a day.

The Dong Ha airfield had been closed for seven months and had to be reactivated for this operation. To support the airdrome operations, the 834th Air Division directed the positioning of several USAF units at Dong Ha. These included a Combat Control Team for communications and air traffic control and a Mobility Team to handle the offload of passengers and cargo. Also, it was necessary to install a Ground Control Approach system, temporary airfield lighting and a TACAN to permit all-weather, 24-hour-a-day operations.

The C-130 operations into Khe Sanh posed difficult and persistent problems throughout the campaign. The Army engineers completed the construction of a new assault landing strip on 4 February. The first C-130 aircraft landed on that day. (See Figure 7.) It was apparent that the dirt surface was too soft for sustained C-130 operations when the lightly loaded aircraft sank into it more than six inches. Consequently, it was recommended to the XXIV Corps Commander that the strip be surfaced with aluminum matting. The recommendation was approved and the engineers completed the matting of the assault strip on 15 February. Concurrently, repairs were being made on the old 3900-foot landing strip which was pocked with shell craters from the 1968 battles. Not until 1 March were the repairs on this longer runway completed.

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When the 834th Air Division was brought into the airlift planning for Operation Lam Son 719, their planners learned that the Khe Sanh Combat Support Base was surrounded by artillery fire zones. In order to accommodate the proposed airlift operation, it was necessary to establish artillery fire corridors through the area for the transport aircraft. Coordination was effected with the XXIV Corps Artillery Officer and the air control agencies serving MR I, to create a corridor from Hue, a terminal control zone at Khe Sanh and an exit corridor to Quang Tri. Procedures were developed to permit the transports continuous access to the corridors during the daylight hours and for closure of the corridors in the event of a tactical emergency requiring that the artillery fire through or into them.

Although the Khe Sanh airfield was the responsibility of the U.S. Army and an Army Aviation Facilities unit was in place on the airfield, the airdrome facilities were not adequate to meet Air Force needs for all-weather, round-the-clock operations. Consequently, the USAF 1st Mobile Communications Group installed, maintained and operated a GCA unit, control tower, TACAN, plus runway and approach lighting. To insure rapid, efficient cargo handling and C-130 turn-around, the 834th Air Division sent to Khe Sanh a Combat Control Team (one officer, two airmen), a Mobility Team (one officer, 15 airmen), a Transportable Airlift Control Element (one officer, three airmen) and a maintenance turn-around team of three airmen. The Mobility Team was equipped with adverse terrain fork lifts and able to unload an aircraft fully loaded with palletized cargo in less than five minutes. During peak operations a C-130 was arriving

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on an average of one every eight minutes. This sortie effort was sustained primarily by positioning 11 aircraft with supporting equipment and personnel including aircrews at Da Nang under a special airlift headquarters. However, until 15 February when the matting of the assault landing strip was finished and the C-130 resupply operations into Khe Sanh began, the burden of the logistics build-up was carried by the U.S. Army truck convoys over QL9 from Dong Ha and Quang Tri. <sup>50/</sup>

A capability for the airdrop of ammunition, rations and POL to the South Vietnamese units operating in Laos was maintained throughout the operation. In keeping with the ground scheme of maneuver, the airdrop contingency plan provided for a two-mile wide artillery-free air corridor over Route 9 from Khe Sanh to Tchepone. A TACAN was installed by the 1st Mobile Communications Group for navigation in the corridor. The TACAN was located five miles southwest of Khe Sanh. Arrangements were made with I Corps G4 for the establishment of drop zones along Route 9 within the corridor. Supplies were stockpiled and rigged at Da Nang for this contingency. Procedures were developed with DASC V, the ABCCC and the artillery units for the implementation of the plan and communications were set up between the artillery and the air traffic control agencies for placing the artillery free corridor in effect. However, when the scheme of maneuver became one based on fixed fire support bases, resupply was accomplished by helicopters. The airlift contingency plan for fixed wing resupply in Laos was never used.

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PTAC RECCE" 12 FEB

19 FEB 71 ALT: 9M

YT J3370 FM: 05 KA-82 (6X)

ARVN FIRE SUPPORT BASE

12NM EAST OF TCHEPONE

14301451062555E 1052601082

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ARVN Fire Support Base  
(12NM East of Tchepone)  
Figure 8

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### ARVN ASSEMBLY

During the deployment phase, selected ARVN units of I Corps including the 1st Armored Brigade, the 1st Ranger Group, two regiments of the 1st Infantry Division, two engineer battalions and small combat support units moved to the Khe Sanh area. There they were joined by the 1st Airborne Division and the 258th Marine Brigade. Vietnamese units joined in the searching operations of the U.S. task forces and prepared for the attack into Laos.

The first contact with the enemy came on 4 February when a U.S. engineer unit was attacked 24 kilometers northwest of Khe Sanh. Elements of the 2d Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry engaged the enemy force killing five of them. Enemy contact remained light through 7 February.

Preparations for the invasion culminated when tactical air strikes and artillery fires were put on targets in Laos in preparation for the initial helicopter assaults. The 14 tactical air strikes requested for this purpose were directed at suspected antiaircraft artillery positions rather than the landing zone areas. These targets were selected by the ground commanders. Additionally, 20 strikes were placed on interdiction points along Route 9 beyond Ban Dong and about Tchepone. On early 8 February seven B-52 strikes were made in support of the ARVN invasion force. <sup>51/</sup>

### JUMP-OFF

At 1000H on 8 February, the 2d Troop of the 17th Armored Cavalry Squadron (ARVN) crossed the border into Laos as lead element of the 1st Armored Task Force. No enemy contact was reported. <sup>52/</sup>

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The 4th Bn, 3rd Inf Regiment, and 3rd Infantry Regiment Command Post completed a heliborne combat assault into LZ Hotel at 1045H. There was no contact with the enemy. The weather in this area was described as fair to good with a cloud ceiling of 3,000 feet and the cloud coverage was "broken."<sup>53/</sup>

The 21st Ranger Battalion completed a combat assault into high ground overlooking Route 925 and the Namxe Samou River, closing at 1500H. On landing, the unit received 12.7mm machine gun fire wounding 11 rangers. The enemy was obviously present in this area. U.S. Air Cavalry gunships covering the helicopter troop lift killed one enemy soldier, destroyed two trucks and fired on an enemy bunker complex causing numerous secondary explosions lasting 30 minutes after the attack.<sup>54/</sup> The rangers moved from the LZ to take up positions three kilometers to the east on the ridge line and begin screening operations on the northern flanks.<sup>55/</sup>

Simultaneously with the rangers' assault, the 2d Airborne Battalion was lifted to a landing site two kilometers east of Objective 30. They arrived at Objective 30 at 1125H. No enemy opposition was encountered.

The initial combat assault of the 1st Airborne Division was complete at 1700H when the 3d Airborne Battalion and 3d Airborne Brigade closed Objective 31. The airborne battalions immediately began to dig in and to construct fire support bases on the two hills.<sup>56/</sup>

The southwesterly thrust of the 1st Infantry Division was completed for the day when the 1st and 2d Battalions, 3d Infantry Regiment landed

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near LZ Blue, eight kilometers southwest of LZ Hotel. Both battalions received small arms and automatic weapons fire in the landing zone area. <sup>57/</sup>

In the center, the Armored Task Force had moved ten kilometers west on Route 9 by 1130H and remained in this location overnight. The highway was in poor condition with numerous washouts, and the dense underbrush on the sides hampered the progress of the two airborne infantry battalions screening for the armored column. <sup>58/</sup>

Thus the attack was launched and by nightfall 6,200 Vietnamese troops were in Laos. <sup>59/</sup> The costs of the first day's combat were light for the ARVN with three killed in action and 38 wounded and three missing in action. Three UH-1H helicopters were shot down by enemy gunners and several others suffered combat damage.

The weather conditions had been marginal in the operational area resulting in some tac air missions being diverted because of low ceilings and poor visibility. In these cases, the fire support was provided by artillery units. <sup>60/</sup>

#### DRIVE TO A LOUI

The weather deteriorated further on 9 February forcing postponement of the planned helicopter combat assaults. The ground combat operations progressed satisfactorily; however, the road improvement efforts of the ARVN engineers were severely hampered by the rain.

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The poor condition of Route 9 held the 1st Armored Task Force's advance to only five kilometers for the day. The other ARVN units improved their fire support bases and conducted patrols in the vicinity of the initial LZs. At 0520H on 10 February a patrol of the 21st Ranger Battalion sighted three enemy tanks and other vehicles towing artillery pieces moving on the road north of their position. The Rangers set up a road block and requested tactical air strikes. However, low ceilings and poor visibility prevented the fighters from engaging the targets. Helicopter gunships were employed but were unsuccessful in destroying the tanks. Contact with the enemy was concentrated in the Ranger area but even here it was light. The enemy appeared to be protecting his assets and gathering his forces. According to a FAC report, some enemy antiaircraft artillery units abandoned positions near Objective A Loui. Eleven trucks towing 37mm AAA pieces were seen moving west on Route 9. Tactical air strikes were employed with unknown results. <sup>61/</sup>

Low ceilings and poor visibility on 10 February delayed the helicopter assault of additional battalions until afternoon. Further, both LZs were defended. Helicopter gunships preparing LZ Delta received 12.7mm machine gun and small-arms fire. One OH-6 and one AH-1 were downed. Both crews were extracted and preparations continued. The first lift of the 4th Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, landed at 1507H with the assault completed at 1632H. <sup>62/</sup>

The initial lift of the 9th Airborne Battalion into the LZ at Objective A Loui was delayed by heavy antiaircraft fire. The LZ was defended by five

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truck-mounted 12.7mm machine guns and small arms. Helicopter gunships and USAF fighters were employed to suppress the enemy guns. The lead elements of the battalion began touching down at 1515H and the entire battalion had been delivered by 1720H. <sup>63/</sup>

The Armored Task Force reached the intersection of Routes 9 and 92 at 1500H. Elements immediately began to secure the A Loui landing zone. Link-up between the 9th Airborne and the 1st Armored Brigade was then effected. Armored Cavalry elements reconnoitered Route 9 west of A Loui and reported it in very good condition, capable of sustaining speeds of 35 mph. <sup>64/</sup>

Earlier in the day a disaster had befallen the ARVN Command when the I Corps' G3 and G4 were killed in a VNAF helicopter that crashed over the battle zone after receiving 37mm artillery fire. <sup>65/</sup>

With the addition of two more infantry battalions into Laos, the Vietnamese strength rose to 7500 men. The build-up of troops continued on 11 February.

The 39th Ranger Battalion was heli-lifted to a landing zone near the 21st Ranger's position. Their lift was uneventful and completed in two hours having started at 1035H. <sup>66/</sup>

Two battalions of the 1st Infantry Regiment made a combat assault into LZ Don. The third wave of helicopters lifting the 3d Battalion came under 12.7mm machine gun fire and the assault was temporarily delayed

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while helicopter gunships placed suppressing fire in the area. The First Battalion was diverted from LZ White to reinforce the 3d Battalion at LZ Don after the ARVN command received a report of a large enemy force located six kilometers south of the landing zone. This lift was completed at 1730H. Five hours earlier the 1st Infantry Regiment headquarters and two batteries had arrived by helicopter at FSB Delta.<sup>67/</sup>

During the day the Armored Task Force sent motorized patrols three kilometers north and three kilometers south of A Loui on Route 92. These patrols established road blocks, one of which engaged an enemy force resulting in one ARVN soldier killed, one wounded and two armored personnel carriers destroyed.<sup>68/</sup>

The 21st Ranger Battalion position overlooking Route 925 received two attacks-by-fire, each consisting of 40 rounds of 82mm mortars, during the night of 11-12 February. Six rangers were wounded.<sup>69/</sup>

#### CONSOLIDATION

At 1000H on 12 February the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, began a helicopter lift into FSB Delta. The lift was completed at noon and followed by the lift of an engineer platoon with two D-2 bulldozers for improvement of the fire support base.<sup>70/</sup> At each of the other fire support bases--Hotel, A Loui, Alpha, Hills 30 and 31 and Ranger Hill--the ARVN soldiers improved and expanded the defenses about the artillery batteries and command post bunkers. All but A Loui, were on high ground and all had a commanding position overlooking an enemy avenue of travel. Later, this was to be as dangerous tactically as it was now advantageous.

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### SEARCHING FOR CACHES

The ARVN began searching operations about their increasingly elaborate defensive positions. The 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment searching near FSB Delta found a weapons and POL cache which contained 60 SKS rifles, 202 AK-47 rifles, four AA machine guns, large quantities of ammunition, 500 boxes of uniforms and 16,400 liters of POL. The 2d Troop, 17th Armored Cavalry Squadron on a search operation found 50 enemy bodies believed to have been killed by artillery or airstrikes. It was estimated that they had been dead for two to three days. Elements of the 3d Airborne and 1st Bn, 1st Infantry, each found sizable caches.<sup>71/</sup>

Elements of the Armored Task Force proceeded west on Route 9 to a point five kilometers beyond FSB A Loui. Further westward movement was to be keyed to resumption of the airmobile assault along the northern ridge which never came.

The South Vietnamese forces in Laos now totaled more than 10,000 men in thirteen infantry battalions, two ranger battalions, two artillery battalions and one engineer battalion.<sup>72/</sup>

This force was deployed in positions forming an elongated crescent along Route 925 on the northern flank, south along Route 92, southeastward to Route 926 and the RVN-Laos border. The center of the line was FSB A Loui on Route 9 in the five kilometer-wide Xe Pon River Valley with the right flank on the ridgeline of the 2,000-foot hills to the north of the valley and the left flank on the high ground to the south of the steep



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escarpment which forms the southern wall of the valley. The hills above the valley are heavily forested and broken by numerous streams and valleys. The ARVN drive to Tchepone temporarily lost its westward momentum as the units searched for caches by day and defended their fire support bases by night.

Through the daylight hours of 13 and 14 February, the ARVN searching parties found truck parks, POL storage areas, food caches, ammunition dumps and small base camps. They found it tactically desirable to call in tactical air strikes to destroy the finds. A particular spectacular result of tactical air strikes on caches was witnessed by patrols of the 21st and 39th Ranger Battalions. They had passed the coordinates of suspected storage areas to their DTOC which in turn passed them to the FAC working the Ranger area for use as targets of opportunity. The area eight kilometers north of FSB 30 was hit by five sets of fighters over an eight-hour period on 14 February. The Rangers reported observing five ammunition dumps burning and estimated the cumulative destruction at 304 tons of ammunition. <sup>73/</sup> Dense smoke covered the area for hours.

Eighty-four sorties were flown on 13 February and 97 on 14 February by USAF fighters and gunships in support of the ARVN troops. Most of the daylight strikes were against storage areas, enemy troop concentrations, or enemy artillery positions. The night sorties predominantly supported ARVN troops in direct contact with enemy forces.

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Each night three FACs, three flareships (C-123) and three gunships (AC-119 or AC-130), one of each for the Rangers, the Airborne Division and the Infantry Division were on station all the time. The Ranger positions were under almost continuous attack in the early morning hours of 13 and 14 February for they were sitting in the middle of a sizable storage area and closest to the enemy's troop concentration. The enemy attackers got as close as possible to the friendly perimeters in an attempt to minimize the effectiveness of the gunships and fighter strikes. The weather was clear both nights and continuous air coverage was provided.

The B-52 Arc Light strikes in these early days of the invasion were against I Corps selected targets such as enemy artillery emplacements, known storage areas and suspected enemy troop positions. The use of Arc Light strikes to support ARVN troops in contact with the enemy was made on 14 February for the first time.<sup>74/</sup> More will be said about this technique as the campaign progresses.

Though all ARVN fixed positions received some attacks by fire, the Rangers experienced the heaviest pressure because of their proximity to the enemy's major forces.

#### ENEMY TROOP DISPOSITION

When the ARVN forces crossed the border into Laos it was estimated that there were about 23,000 North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops in the Laotian Military Regions III and IV. Subsequently the estimate was 15,000 maneuver and combat support troops and 12,000 rear service personnel facing

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the friendly units in the Lam Son 719 area of operation. Later these figures were again revised to 24,000 and 11,000 respectively.

The 70B Corps with three infantry divisions employing artillery ranging from 105mm to 240mm and a tank regiment with 120 vehicles including T-54s operated in the area from Khe Sanh to southern Laos. Its three divisions had specific areas of responsibility within the Corps region. The 308th Division operated from Khe Sanh to the RVN-Laos border and in mid-February had only one regiment engaged with others enroute. The 304th Division had the responsibility for the area from the border west to A Loui with the 24B Regiment and advance elements of the 66th and possibly the 9th Regiments. The 320th Division with only the 64th Regiment assigned in mid-February operated west of A Loui. The bulk of the 70B Corps forces were north of Route 9 and faced the northern portion of the ARVN line. Additionally, the 102d Regiment (Reinforced) was located north of Route 925 opposite the ARVN Ranger elements.

Elements of the 2d NVA Division and Rear Service units opposed the ARVN 1st Infantry positions on the southern flank and were concentrated along Routes 914 and 921. Later in February, the 324B Division moved into the Laotian salient and joined with the 2d Division and Rear Service units to put heavy pressure on the ARVN 1st Infantry Division and the VNMC Brigades. <sup>75/</sup>  
(See Figure 9.)

In the Republic of Vietnam, the B-5 Front with the 31st and 27th Infantry Regiments, 84th and 38th Artillery Regiments and the 15th Engineer

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Battalion, operated between Dong Ha and Khe Sanh with the mission of harassing U.S. forces and cutting the allied LOC. <sup>76/</sup>

The Communist forces from 10-16 February reacted to the invasion with an ever increasing volume of artillery and rocket attacks against the fire support bases from Dong Ha to A Loui. Every one of them was hit several times. <sup>77/</sup>

#### SCREENING TECHNIQUES OF U.S. FORCES

In Quang Tri Province, which was the responsibility of the U.S. forces, the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry, employed a highly effective technique which capitalized on air mobility and massive firepower. Small combat teams were moved from one terrain feature to another throughout the AO. When one of the teams located an enemy force it immediately requested artillery fire, helicopter aerial rocket artillery (ARA) and tactical air strikes. When a sizable enemy force was fixed, the teams reassembled into squads and platoons and fought on the company level under the control of the battalion commander. Employing this technique in one engagement on 15 February near FSB Vandegrift, 115 enemy were killed. Using highly mobile combat teams with fire support enabled the First Brigade to maintain the security of this rather large AO. <sup>78/</sup>

#### ARVN TACTICS

The ARVN forces also relied heavily on the massive array of U.S. firepower available to them in the form of artillery, aerial rocket artillery, gunships, B-52s and tactical fighters. However, they did not employ the same

# ORDER OF BATTLE - 12 February 1971

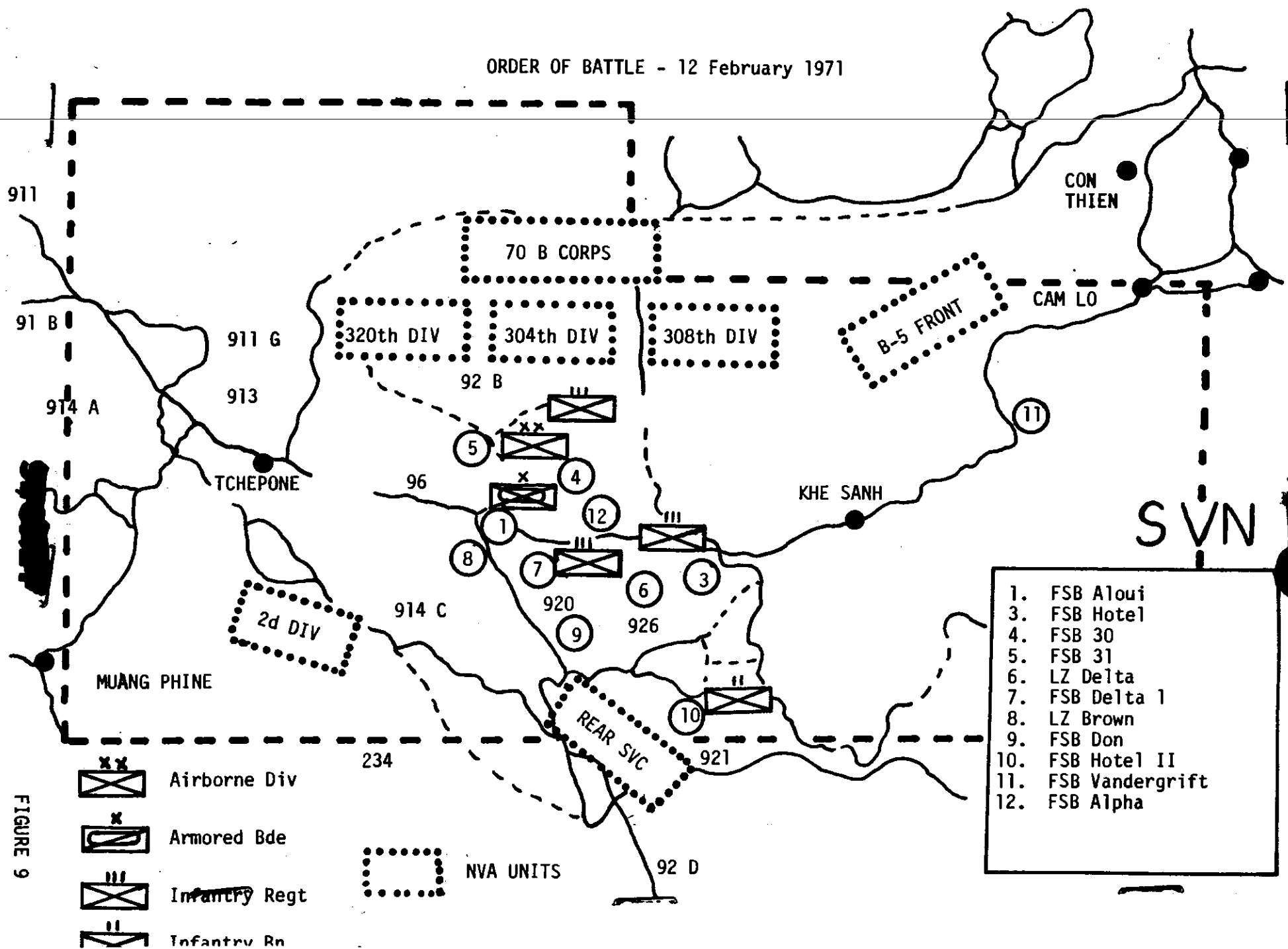


FIGURE 9

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techniques of highly mobile teams constantly searching the area of operations. By 15 February, it was clear that the ARVN units, especially the Ranger and Airborne Battalions, preferred to operate close to their fire support bases and to search in platoon or company size elements. This was less true of the 1st Infantry Division whose battalions were more experienced in the terrain and the NVA tactics than their Airborne and Ranger compatriots. Elements of the 3d Infantry Regiment searched far south from FSB Hotel and all 1st Infantry Division units sent out night patrols to set <sup>79/</sup>ambushes on the approaches to their fire support bases.

The introduction of the 6th Airborne Battalion into Objective 31 on 13 February brought RVNAF strength in Laos to 10,288. The searching operations continued with relatively light enemy contact through 17 February. On this day the 2d Battalion, 3d Infantry Regiment in a thrust towards Base Area 611 moved south to Route 921 interdicting the road and destroying caches.

#### RANGER HILL

About midnight on 18 February, the 39th Ranger Battalion was attacked by a two-battalion-size enemy force. Several of the defensive outposts were overrun. U.S. artillery, flareships and gunships supported the defenders throughout the night. However, the fighting went on through the day and night of 19 February. The enemy breached the perimeter defenses and occupied the outer trenches. From 1930H, 19 February to 0730H, 20 February, seven USAF gunships and six flareships were employed in support of the Rangers. On several occasions during the night the gunships were directed

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by the ground commander to fire into the outer trenches. Then from 0730H to 1430H on 20 February, 32 sorties of USAF fighters struck the enemy positions. Helicopter resupply and medical evacuation were attempted under cover of tactical fighters, helicopter gunships and artillery; however, both of the first two helicopters to land were hit by mortar fire. One subsequently crashed and burned, the other succeeded in getting to FSB 30. Heavy mortar attacks continued through the afternoon. Communication with the Ranger commander was lost at 1820H and by 1900H the position was abandoned. One hundred and fifty Rangers exfiltrated to the 21st Ranger's position arriving at 2145H.<sup>80/</sup> The 39th Ranger Battalion was out of the battle having suffered 178 soldiers killed or missing and 145 wounded. Only 108 members were considered combat effective on 21 February.<sup>81/</sup> During its three-day struggle the 39th Rangers had fought the 102d NVA Regiment. Enemy losses were estimated at 639 KIA.<sup>82/</sup>

#### LULL IN THE FIGHTING

The enemy now divided his attention between the remaining Rangers and the 3d Airborne Battalion at FSB 31. Both positions received attacks by fire on 21 February. However, the attacks were infrequent and not followed by infantry.

On 22 February, thirteen helicopter sorties successfully evacuated 122 wounded Rangers from the 21st Ranger Battalion area. The Ranger position had been "prepped" for nearly two hours by tactical air strikes, helicopter gunships, ARA and artillery. None of the medevac "choppers" suffered a hit.<sup>83/</sup> Following the evacuation of the wounded, 400 soldiers remained at the 21st Ranger's position.

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Elements of the 1st and 3d Infantry Regiments continued their south-  
easterly thrust reaching Routes 92D and 914 then moving northwest along  
these routes searching and destroying. One unit found the POL pipeline  
previously hit by gunships of the U.S. 2d Squadron, 17 Air Cavalry. The  
pipeline was destroyed at intervals over a five kilometer distance. <sup>84/</sup>

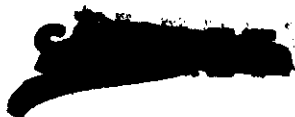
These wide-ranging infantry units moved by helicopter back to the edge  
of the escarpment on 23 February, leaving only the 1st Battalion, 1st  
Infantry Regiment on the southern salient. It moved to a position four  
kilometers north of the intersection of Routes 92 and 914. The 4th  
Battalion, 3d Infantry Regiment made a combat assault into LZ Brown and  
the 3d Regiment headquarters was lifted with the 2d Battalion into FSB  
Delta I. <sup>85/</sup>

Weather and hostile fire on the pick-up zone delayed the movement  
of the 1st Infantry Division elements to the fire support bases along  
the escarpment. However, the 3d Regiment did succeed in lifting  
engineers and some artillery from FSB Hotel II to FSB Delta I. <sup>86/</sup>

#### LOGISTICAL SUPPORT AT KHE SANH

A massive resupply effort to sustain the U.S. and ARVN combat forces  
was mounted at the Khe Sanh combat support base. It was critically  
important that adequate stores of JP-4 fuel and ammunition of all types  
be maintained at Khe Sanh. The planned delivery of this cargo by C-130  
aircraft was delayed until 15 February by the necessity to cover the  
assault landing strip with aluminum matting. Until 17 February when  
C-130 operations reached 40 sorties a day, all supplies had to be



  
transported by Army trucks or CH-47 helicopters and U.S. Marine CH-53 helicopters. This strained the Army's transport capability and engineering force, which had to expend great effort keeping Route 9 passable. After the C-130 operations began, the POL and ammunition levels reached the desired reserve.

The ARVN forces were resupplied almost entirely by helicopter. The Armored Task Force and the Airborne units designated to secure Route 9 were never able to insure safe passage for ARVN truck convoys. Consequently, it was not a reliable means of resupply. <sup>87/</sup>

The helicopter traffic about Khe Sanh caused difficulties for arriving and departing C-130 aircraft especially during the periods when only one runway was available. These difficulties were attributed to the extremely high density of rotary wing traffic, a lack of air discipline on the part of some U.S. Army helicopter pilots, and the low level of experience of Army tower operators in controlling the complex fixed wing and rotary wing air traffic situation at Khe Sanh. To correct this problem, an Air Force control tower and operators were provided by the 1st Mobile Communications Group at Clark to assist in this air traffic control problem. <sup>88/</sup>

Despite the difficulties, however, the resupply effort was always adequate to sustain the combat units.

#### ARC LIGHT

The B-52 Arc Light strikes provided heavy fire power for the ARVN invasion force. By 23 February, 399 Arc Light sorties had been flown in

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support of Lam Son 719. The cumulative results to that date included 201 enemy killed plus 813 tons of ammunition, 400 structures and vast quantities of supplies and equipment destroyed.\*<sup>89/</sup> The targets were selected by CG, I Corps, on the basis of visual and photo reconnaissance as well as other sources of intelligence and approved by MACV. The targets were heavy troop concentrations, bivouac areas, supply sites and bunker complexes.<sup>90/</sup> The ARVN command reported that B-52 strikes on 12 February had hit the Headquarters Command Post of the NVA 308th Division killing 35 and destroying communication equipment.<sup>91/</sup> On 18 February three Arc Light cells delivered their bomb loads on targets in the area of Routes 92 and 926, supporting the southerly thrust of the 1st Infantry Division. Arc Light sorties were targeted in the Ranger Hill area during the desperate battle of the 39th Rangers. The ARVN stated that these strikes "disrupted enemy operations" and killed an unspecified number of enemy soldiers.<sup>98/</sup> More concrete reports of B-52 strike results came on 25 February from the 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment which searched two Arc Light areas. It found a total of 142 enemy dead, four tons of mortars and artillery ammunition destroyed, various pieces of military equipment and a large tunnel complex damaged.<sup>93/</sup> A tactic of using Arc Light against enemy troops in contact was employed by units of the 1st Infantry Division. They would designate a target area where enemy troops were known to be deployed, engage these troops in combat in this area prior to the Arc Light Time-Over-Target and then just before the TOT withdraw from the target area. For a single

\*Actually the results of Arc Light strikes could not be accurately determined because the air also struck many of the same targets.

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such engagement by the 1st Battalion, 3d Infantry Regiment on 27 February, 94/  
29 enemy soldiers were killed by air.

#### TACTICAL AIR

Tactical air strikes in the period 20-25 February were predominately directed at known enemy positions and storage areas in the daylight hours and to support troops in contact or to destroy trucks at night. More than 110 sorties per day were flown in direct support of ground forces in the Laos AO of Lam Son 719. Fully one-third of the sorties were against targets on the northern flank in support of the Rangers still engaged in screening operations. The balance of the sorties flew in the Airborne and Infantry AOs in numbers which varied each day. Because the Infantry had aggressively thrust at the enemy's LOCs to Base Area 611, they tended to have more daytime contact with the enemy and thus to employ more tactical air strikes, as well as Arc Lights, against enemy troops. For example, the 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry located an enemy force in bunkers at 0930H on 25 February. The infantrymen requested tactical fighter strikes on the positions which were made. A search of the area revealed 17 enemy soldiers killed by air action. 95/

#### ENEMY STRIKES HARD - OBJECTIVE 31

On 25 February the NVA forces launched a generalized offensive against the ARVN positions. It began with the pre-dawn attack on a 1st Airborne position near FSB A Loui. During this engagement the friendlies were supported by a FAC (O-2), a flareship (C-123) and a gunship (AC-130) and with fighter strikes employing all weather delivery techniques. 95/

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contact continued until dawn. The Rangers reported heavy vehicle traffic on Route 925 and noisy troop activity near their position. They requested a flareship. It was provided though the enemy was not sighted. <sup>96/</sup>

By 1100H, enemy attacks were in progress around the entire ARVN perimeter from the Rangers to the forward units of the 1st Infantry Division as well as behind the lines near FSB Alpha. The persistent incoming mortar fire on Hotel II forced cancellation of the 1st Infantry's plans to abandon the fire support base and move two battalions to LZ Brown. The division's positions south along Route 92 received repeated mortar barrages followed by infantry attacks. Thirty-two tactical air strikes supported the 1st Infantry Division in its resistance to the enemy pressure. <sup>97/</sup>

An F-4 delivering napalm on enemy troops 10 kilometers northwest of Hotel II was hit by ground fire. The pilot was killed and the backseater executed a dual ejection after flying the aircraft back to Phu Cat. <sup>98/</sup>

The Rangers received heavy mortar fire followed by ground attack. The Rangers chose to evacuate their vulnerable position. They were lifted by helicopter to Objective 30 and one-half of them were carried on to Khe Sanh. The remaining 160 rangers joined with the 2d Airborne Battalion in the defense of Objective 30. This position received attacks throughout the day. <sup>99/</sup>

The most determined attack was made on Objective 31. The 3d Airborne Brigade Headquarters with the 3d Airborne Battalion, an artillery battery and a Ranger Reconnaissance Company occupied this post. Mortar fire began at 0700. A FAC searching for 12.7mm machine gun positions two kilometers

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northeast of the Airborne main camp sighted over 100 trenches and small-arms gunpits along the ridge line. After observing gun fire from these positions, he delivered two flights of F-4s against them. The strikes hit the enemy as he advanced to within 250 meters of the Airborne perimeter defenses. <sup>100/</sup> The ground commander reported that an entire enemy mortar platoon had been killed by the air strikes. However, Objective 31 was encircled by NVA troops. Mortar and artillery fire continued to rain on the base camp. Helicopter gunships and artillery sought to suppress the enemy fire between air strikes. At 1430H a FAC spotted three enemy tanks within 30 meters to the east of the airborne positions. It was a coordinated tank and infantry attack. The FAC directed tactical air strikes on the tanks. Four A-7s delivering 16 MK 83s, four MK 82s and four Rockeyes destroyed the three tanks and killed 30 enemy soldiers. Three more tanks were seen coming up the hill from Route 92B. They were hit by seven sets of fighters delivering primarily BLU-27 and MK 82. During these strikes one F-4 was downed but the tanks were destroyed and 100 NVA killed. However, the enemy pressed the attack with more tanks and troops. A thunderstorm broke over the battle area making it impossible to get fighters on to the enemy from 1540H to 1735H. <sup>101/</sup> During this time a tank and enemy infantry penetrated the defenses and occupied the north and northwest sides of the position forcing the ARVN troops to the southern edge. The battle raged into the night with USAF gunships, flareships and FACs providing continuous support. Fires from burning tanks dotted the hill. Communications were lost at 2330H when the artillery commander called for artillery directly on his position because the enemy was digging into the roof of his bunker.

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By dawn the defenders had withdrawn to a position on the ridge south of Objective 31. The 3d Airborne Brigade commander and part of his staff were dead or missing. The enemy occupied Objective 31 with tanks and infantry. Tactical air strikes and helicopter gunships attacked the enemy tanks throughout the day of 26 February. One company of the 3d Airborne Battalion, moved south and linked up with an armored relief column pushing up from Route 92. The relief units were stopped by heavy enemy resistance several hundred meters short of FSB 31. <sup>102/</sup> (See Figure 10.)

On 25 February, 108 tactical air sorties were flown in support of the beleaguered airborne units. Five Arc Light cells (three B-52s each cell) delivered their massive bombloads around FSB 31 on 26 February. The 64th NVA Regiment with tank support had made a determined and briefly successful assault. <sup>103/</sup> But it paid a high price. The I Corps headquarters reported that 250 NVA soldiers were killed and 15 tanks (12 PT-76, three T-34) were destroyed. <sup>104/</sup>

The 1st Airborne Division was reorganized on 26 February when the 2d Airborne Brigade headquarters was lifted into the LZ near Objective 30 and assumed responsibility for the northeastern AO. The 11th Airborne Battalion followed the Brigade CP into the area on 27 February.

The 1st Infantry Division had a series of brisk contacts with the enemy on 26 and 27 February in which they had the full range of air support. In searches on 27 February, they found 227 enemy killed by tactical air or Air Light strikes. <sup>105/</sup> The KBA total mounted on 28 February when 1st:

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Infantry elements found 47 more bodies in areas hit by tactical air strikes. Airborne units on the same day found some 85 enemy bodies in Arc Light target zones near FSB 31. <sup>106/</sup>

Enemy armor was sighted throughout the AO on 28 February. Tanks were seen both east and west of A Loui on Route 9 and south on Route 92C to a point west of LZ Don. <sup>107/</sup> Tactical air strikes were credited with destroying 15 tanks and damaging two others. <sup>108/</sup> At 0100H on 1 March eight enemy tanks were sighted on Route 9 eight kilometers west of A Loui moving southeast. They were observed, engaged and dispersed by a FAC and AC-130 gunship. <sup>109/</sup> U.S. Air Cavalry units continued to report numerous tank sightings on 1 and 2 March; however, most of the tanks were stationary and heavily camouflaged. Many of the tanks were using huts for concealment. The pilots reported that most of the tanks appeared to be medium rather than light tanks. <sup>110/</sup> (See Figure 11.)

The 1st Infantry Division continued to be in contact with the enemy on its searching operations. However, enemy-initiated activity slackened noticeably, permitting the extraction and redeployment of three battalions of the 3d Regiment. <sup>111/</sup> During this period of relative quiet, the division resupplied its battalions by helicopter and evacuated its wounded.

At 1850H on 1 March the 17th Armored Cavalry Squadron and 3d Airborne Battalion in the vicinity of FSB 31 were hit with a coordinated tank and infantry attack by a regimental-size force. Artillery, tactical air strikes, gunships and flareships supported the friendly troops until the enemy broke off the attack. This fight resulted in killing 250 enemy soldiers and

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destroying 15 enemy tanks. The ARVN suffered eight soldiers killed, 50 wounded and six Armored Personnel Carriers damaged. <sup>112/</sup>

During the night of 1-2 March, the 2d Airborne Battalion at FSB 30 received mortar and rocket fire of increasing intensity. At 1530H on 2 March, the attack-by-fire was followed by a tank-supported infantry charge. Intense fighting continued till 2100H when a lull occurred. Thirty-six tactical air sorties hit the enemy surrounding FSB 30 during the daylight hours. AC-119 and AC-130 gunships and C-123 flareships were on station all night over the site. Heavy fighting broke out again about 0300H on 3 March and continued into the daylight hours when tactical air and Arc Light sorties struck the enemy positions. <sup>113/</sup> The ground attack lasted ten hours with the ARVN claiming 98 enemy killed while losing one ARVN soldier killed and three wounded. <sup>114/</sup>

The locus of intense close fighting shifted back to the 17th ACS and 8th Airborne at FSB 31\* on the night of 3 March. With the dawn the ARVN counted 383 enemy dead and two captured. <sup>115/</sup>

It is apparent that the widespread offensive conducted by the NVA 70B Corps from 25 February to 3 March was designed to halt the ARVN advance, inflict heavy casualties and force a withdrawal. Troop and supply build-up had occurred along Routes 1032 and 925 on the north and 914 and 926 in the south prior to launching the offensive. It was a very "conventional"

\*The terms FSB 31, Objective 31 and Hill 31 all refer to the same geographic position.

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series of battles. Tanks and infantry assaulted fixed artillery positions. The assaults were met, though not always stopped, by air-delivered firepower.

The ARVN forces had held against the enemy offensive and on 3 March the 1st Infantry Division resumed its western drive.

#### RAID TO TCHEPONE

During the first three days of March, I Corps positioned additional forces in the Khe Sanh area for introduction into Laos. These forces included the 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron, the 2d Infantry Regiment and the 258th Vietnamese Marine Brigade. With the reinforcements and a series of rapid heliborne assaults, the ARVN regained the initiative.

#### LZ LO LO

The 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment made a combat assault into LZ Lo Lo on 3 March beginning at 1000H. The assault was interrupted twice by intense hostile fire on the troop-lift helicopters. Forty-two helicopters were hit, 20 were declared nonflyable and seven were destroyed. Tactical air strikes were called in to suppress the ground fire and the assault was completed at 1615H. <sup>116/</sup> (For a full discussion of the LZ preparation see Chapter IV.) The 3d Battalion secured the area surrounding the LZ and constructed a fire support base. At 0800H on 4 March while searching in the vicinity of LZ Lo Lo the infantrymen engaged an enemy force <sup>117/</sup> killing 83 of them and capturing more than 40 weapons.

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The 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, was helilifted into Lo Lo at 1150H on 4 March. It was followed by lifts of artillery, ammunition, supplies and the 4th Battalion completing the build-up of Lo Lo at 1640H.

#### LZ LIZ

The 1st Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment made a heliborne combat assault into LZ Liz at 1735H on 4 March. Sixty-five lift helicopters were required. Eighteen helicopters were hit, two of them were destroyed while 16 were recovered.<sup>118/</sup> Again enemy gunners had inflicted heavy damage on the U.S. Army helicopter forces even though sixty-one tactical air strikes were used in the LZ preparation. (See Chapter IV.)

The 1st Battalion dug in and constructed a fire support base on the high ground adjacent to the LZ.

#### MARINES REPLACE THE 1ST INFANTRY

While the 1st Infantry Regiment moved west establishing new fire bases on the rim of the escarpment, their place in the line on the southern flank was taken by Marine units. The 7th Battalion, 258th VNMC Brigade had been inserted at FSB Delta on 2 March and was joined by the 2d and 4th Battalions, 147th VNMC Brigade on 4 March. The next day the 8th Battalion, 147th VNMC Brigade closed to FSB Delta by air. The Marines now were responsible for the security of the eastern portion of the AO south of Route 9.<sup>119/</sup>

#### LZ SOPHIA

The advance west continued on 5 March when the 4th and 5th Battalions of the 2d Infantry Regiment were helilifted from Khe Sanh to LZ Sophia.

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The assault was completed at 1640H. While the 4th Battalion set about emplacing the artillery pieces and constructing defenses, the 5th Battalion pushed out and searched the surrounding area. They found a former enemy camp destroyed by air strikes. There were 124 enemy dead, 33 huts damaged plus 71 weapons, eight tons of rice and 55 blocks of TNT found. 120/

#### LZ HOPE

The 2d and 3d Battalion, 2d Infantry Regiment were delivered by helicopter into LZ Hope from Khe Sanh on 6 March. The first helicopter set down on the landing zone at 1206H and the two battalion lift of 60 helicopters was complete at 1343H. Only one aircraft took a hit on the assault. (See Chapter IV.)

The infantry moved off the LZ to high ground. In searching operations they discovered 102 enemy killed by air, along with five trucks, six 12.7mm machine guns, 225 gallons of POL in drums and assorted small arms. Elements of the 2d Battalion then moved southwest towards the town of Tchepone. 121/

#### SEARCH AND DESTROY

Throughout the area of operations the ARVN forces searched in the vicinity of the fire support bases and engaged the enemy in small unit actions. They continued to find evidence of "substantial enemy equipment and personnel losses as a result of tac air and Arc Light strikes." 122/ The 3d Infantry Regiment command post at FSB Lo Lo received an attack-by-fire followed by enemy infantry. The enemy force was repulsed with 31 killed. Several Airborne units received mortar attacks with little damage sustained. 123/

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The 3d Battalion VNMC was introduced to FSB Hotel along with the 9th Battalion, 369th Marine Brigade. Six Marine battalions were now in Laos. South Vietnamese strength in Laos reached 16,844 with 18 battalions of infantry (including Airborne), four artillery battalions, three armored cavalry squadrons, two engineer battalions and six Marine battalions. All Rangers were removed from Laos and conducted their operations in the remainder of the campaign from the 1st Ranger Group headquarters at FSB 124/ Phu Loc.

HIGH WATER MARK - TCHEPONE

The invasion reached its high water mark on 7 March when three battalions of the 2d Infantry Regiment conducted operations in and about the town of Tchepone. The 2d Battalion searched in and north of the former town site. The Third Battalion searched southeast of the town on the north bank of the Xe Pon River. The 4th Battalion had moved northwest from FSB Sophia and searched on the south bank of the river. The 5th Battalion remained in the vicinity of FSB Sophia. 125/

The 2d Battalion reported finding 1220 122mm rockets destroyed by an Arc Light strike at 1300H and observed 500 secondary explosions, two kilometers northeast of Tchepone, following an Arc Light Strike at 1430H. FACs reported observing over 1600 secondary explosions from the same area on 8 March after a tactical air strike. One kilometer south of this point, the 2d Battalion discovered 52 dead bodies and a cache of stored weapons on 8 March. 126/

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Resupply missions were flown to all fire support bases on 7 and 8 March. Contact with the enemy was light except at FSBs Lo Lo and Delta. Both of these sites experienced mortar and rocket attacks followed by multi-company assaults. <sup>127/</sup>

Saturation search operations continued on 9 March by all units of the 1st Infantry Division. A total of 59 enemy bodies and numerous destroyed supply caches were found in areas hit by tactical air strikes. The 1st Infantry Regiment observed enemy tanks near its command post. The tanks were hit by 155mm and 175mm artillery resulting in three tanks destroyed and five left burning. The 4th Battalion of this regiment engaged an enemy force south of the Xe Pon River killing twelve Communist soldiers. <sup>128/</sup>

Ground searches on 10 March confirmed more enemy killed by Arc Light strikes. Six kilometers southeast of Sophia, 391 bodies were found, 144 were counted in the 1st Infantry Regiment area, 150 near FSB 30 and 60 just north of FSB Delta. <sup>129/</sup>

All three battalions that had been searching in the Tchepone area withdrew on 10 March to the escarpment and deployed to the east and south towards the high ground above Route 914. <sup>130/</sup>

#### ENEMY BUILD-UP

At 1230H on 10 March FSB Sophia received 122 rounds of mixed 82mm and 122mm mortar rounds. Twelve ARVN soldiers were wounded and six 105mm howitzers were damaged. <sup>131/</sup> Though enemy resistance to the Tchepone raid had been very light, there was reason to believe that the NVA was preparing

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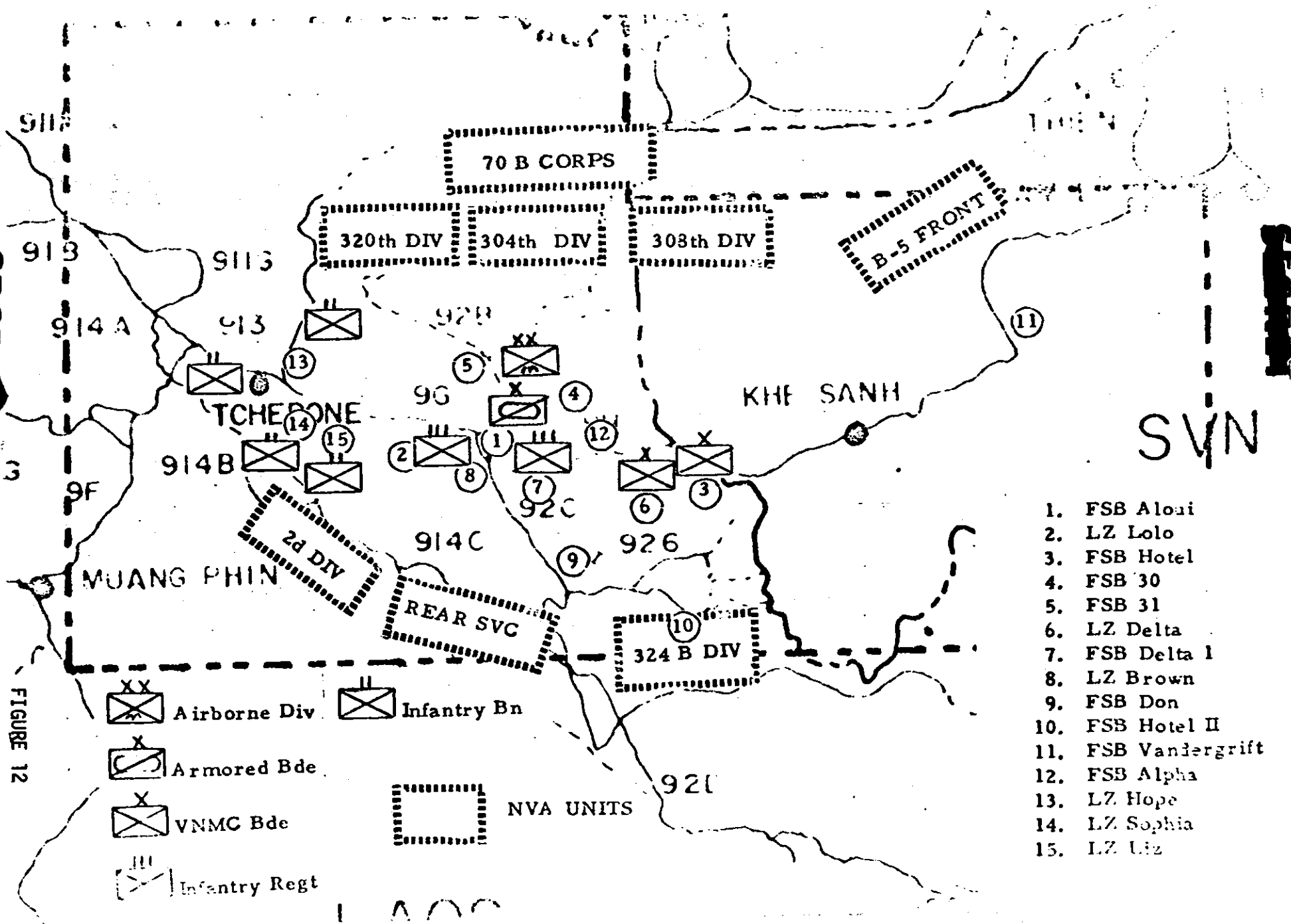


FIGURE 12

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for another offensive. Sensor detections showed heavy traffic on all routes coming into the battle area during the week of 3-10 March. Traffic on Routes 1032B, 914B and 92A was especially heavy.<sup>132/</sup> Ten southbound tracked vehicles were detected moving along Route 914B south of FSB Liz. Likewise, southbound tracked vehicles were detected in the Ban Raving entry area.<sup>133/</sup>

The 708 Corps and attached units had suffered approximately 12,000 casualties (including over 3,000 KBA) since the Lam Son operation began. These losses were apparently replaced by the introduction of five more regiments into the war zone. Combat troop strength rose to more than 24,000 organized in some twelve infantry regiments, two artillery regiments and one tank regiment. Additionally, there were 11,000 rear service troops in the area. The forces were approximately evenly divided in their deployment north and south of the ARVN position.<sup>134/</sup> With its units replenished and reinforced, the NVA command waited for the opportunity to mount a heavy attack against the South Vietnamese in Laos.

#### RETURN TO THE EAST

The Tchepone raiders (2d Infantry Regiment) continued their easterly deployment on 11 March. The 2d Regiment headquarters, the 2d and 5th Battalions and a 105mm artillery battery were helflifted from LZ Liz to LZ Brown "leapfrogging" over the 1st Regiment at Lo Lo into the center of the 1st Infantry Division's positions on the escarpment. The 4th Battalion operated around FSB Sophia and the 3d Battalion secured LZ Liz.<sup>135/</sup>

On 12 March, the 2d Regiment and its accompanying two battalions established a new fire support base at Sophia East (one kilometer west

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of LZ Brown). The 3d Battalion was lifted out of LZ Liz and arrived at LZ Moon (adjacent to FSB Sophia East) at 1708H. Immediately after this lift, the 4th Battalion was extracted from FSB Sophia and closed on LZ Moon at 1835H.<sup>136/</sup> The 2d Regiment consolidated its position and prepared for an attack south to interdict Route 914 at Cua Viet and Cua Tang.<sup>137/</sup>

The 4th Armored Battalion (Composite) joined the ARVN forces in Laos on 13 March. Its 260 personnel in 30 M41 tanks, nine M113 armored personnel carriers and two M548 light tracked recovery vehicles moved along Route 9 to FSB Alpha to augment route security operations. South Vietnamese strength in the Laotian AO reached its peak of 17,104 on this date.<sup>138/</sup>

The 1st Infantry Division continued its searching operation and redeployment maneuvers. The 2d Regiment command post moved by air to FSB Delta I. The 1st Regiment received three mortar and artillery attacks of increasing intensity on FSB Lo Lo and vicinity. These attacks-by-fire proved to be the prelude to four days of bitter fighting.

#### WITHDRAWAL FROM LAOS

The orderly, phased redeployment east along the escarpment with thrusts south to Route 914 which began on 10 March had met only token enemy resistance. The 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry Regiment, probing south on 14 March reached the edge of the high ground overlooking Route 914 and established a position two kilometers north of the road and conducted small unit probes down to it.<sup>139/</sup> Elements of the 2d Regiment reported that tactical air strikes destroyed two PT-76 tanks and an ammunition cache one kilometer east of LZ



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Brown. Later they reported a battalion size enemy force two kilometers west of the tank site but adverse weather prevented tactical air strikes on the position. <sup>140/</sup> On the same day a FAC reported observing six enemy tanks 15 kilometers west of FSB A Loui on Route 9. The tanks were engaged and destroyed by tactical air. <sup>141/</sup> It was clear that the enemy had timed his offensive maneuvers to strike the ARVN forces in the most vulnerable phase of their operations, the withdrawal.

#### LO LO ABANDONED

From 0600H on 14 March until 1100H on 17 March, the 1st Infantry Regiment was in almost continuous heavy contact with enemy troops. FSB Lo Lo received mortar, rocket and 155mm artillery fire throughout 14 and 15 March. Resupply helicopters were unable to land at Lo Lo because of the intense ground fire. At 2200H on the night of 15 March the 3d Battalion and the 1st Infantry Regiment command post abandoned Lo Lo and moved to the high ground two kilometers east of the LZ. Four 155mm howitzers were destroyed in place prior to the evacuation. Four 105mm howitzers and one 155mm howitzer had been heavily damaged by enemy fire. <sup>142/</sup> Before the 1st Regiment withdrew, a high price was exacted from the attacking enemy. The enemy infantry sought to get as close as possible to the friendly positions to avoid U.S. air strikes. However, the 1st Regiment's commander called for B-52 strikes within 500 yards of his position. <sup>143/</sup> The commander discontinued tactical air support the night of 17-18 March just before his withdrawal. The regiment continued to engage the enemy while moving north and east off the escarpment and preparing for helicopter extraction on 18 March.

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In the three days of intense fighting around Lo Lo, NVA losses were put at 1100 killed while the 1st Regiment suffered 66 soldiers killed and 192 wounded. The 1st Regiment command post plus the 1st, 2d and 3d Battalions were extracted from Laos to Khe Sanh on 18 March completing the lift at 1230H. <sup>144/</sup> The 4th Battalion covered the Regiment's withdrawal and was in intermittent heavy contact with the enemy through the night and until its extraction on 18 March. Fifty infantrymen including the Commander and Executive Officer of this battalion were killed and 80 wounded. But the 4th Battalion with air support killed 567 enemy soldiers. <sup>145/</sup> The 4th Battalion closed Khe Sanh by air at 1644H, 18 March.

## THE RAIDERS ARE BLOODIED

Initially during this four-day battle of the 1st Infantry Regiment, the 2d Regiment had continued its searching and destroying operations. It called in numerous air strikes on base camps, supply caches, and enemy troop concentrations. In its searches from 14 to 17 March, its units found literally hundreds of enemy bodies obviously killed by air strikes. <sup>146/</sup> However, enemy pressure on the 2d Regiment mounted and its 2d Battalion which had been operating near Route 914 moved north to join the battalions operating in the FSB Sophia East and LZ Brown areas. The 2d Regiment CP had moved to FSB Delta I several days earlier. By 1000H, 17 March all four 2d Regiment battalions were on the high ground immediately south of LZ Brown and moving east toward FSB Delta I. The 5th Battalion which remained in the LZ Brown area to screen the withdrawal, reported that 80 enemy were killed by tactical air strikes during an engagement. <sup>147/</sup> The 5th Battalion was extracted by helicopter to Khe Sanh on 18 March completing

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the lift at 1545H. <sup>148/</sup> The other three battalions moved off the escarpment during the night of 18-19 March. Large, well-coordinated, main force NVA units were now conducting heavy attacks on the infantrymen. These forces had flame throwers and heavy artillery. Rear service units moved with them employing antiaircraft artillery, thereby making resupply of the fire support bases not feasible. Thirty-two tactical air strikes were flown in support of the 2d Regiment in addition to U.S. Army gunship and artillery support. U.S. Air Force gunships and flareships covered the units throughout the night of 19 March as they moved towards FSB Delta I. The 2d Battalion claimed 85 enemy killed in the day's battle, the 3d Battalion reported 87 enemy killed and the 4th Battalion reported killing 195 Communist soldiers. <sup>149/</sup>

As they fought their way toward FSB Delta I, that position was receiving such intense mortar and artillery fire that only one of 26 requested helicopter resupply sorties landed on 19 March. Artillery pieces and ammunition dumps were destroyed by enemy fire. The position could not be held if it could not be resupplied. The 3d Battalion was extracted by helicopter from a pick-up zone four kilometers west of FSB Delta I, but 28 of the 40 helicopters in the lift received hits and were rendered nonflyable. <sup>150/</sup>

The intense antiaircraft fire forced the termination of efforts to extract the remaining two battalions on 20 March. The remainder of the 2d Regiment moved out to find more suitable pick-up zones. They were finally extracted on 21 March and closed Khe Sanh at 1830H exhausted and bloodied. <sup>151/</sup>

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HASTENED WITHDRAWAL

Beginning on 18 March every ARVN position was hit by mortar, rocket and artillery fire. The airborne battalions on the northern flank received these attacks both day and night. Helicopter extraction of the most exposed unit, the 2d Airborne Battalion was attempted on 19 March but was cancelled after three tries because of very heavy ground fire on the LZ. The 2d and 7th Airborne Battalions remained in heavy contact with the enemy on the northern flank while the 1st Airborne Brigade and the Armored Task Force evacuated FSB A Loui. The 2d and 7th Battalions were extracted on 20 March completing the lift to Khe Sanh at 1815H. Both battalions were lifted on to Dong Ha closing at 1930H. <sup>152/</sup>

EVACUATION FROM A LOUI

The 1st Airborne Brigade and the Armored Task Force (11ACS, 17ACS, 8ABN and 9ABN) began the withdrawal from FSB A Loui at first light on 19 March. By 0730H the last elements of the column observed four enemy tanks moving towards A Loui and about one kilometer away from the site at that time. The tanks were stopped by artillery fire and subsequently destroyed by tactical air strikes at 0950H. <sup>153/</sup> The task force then proceeded east on Route 9 toward FSB Alpha. Four kilometers east of A Loui the end of the column was ambushed even though airborne troops were reportedly protecting the flanks. Rocket propelled grenade fire disabled one or more vehicles blocking the road. The column had included four disabled tanks, three disabled armored personnel carriers and three howitzers that were being towed. In the confusion that developed during the ambush, these

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vehicles and others were abandoned. Though tactical fighters and helicopter gunships were available, neither was requested by the task force commander. Later the commander requested air strikes on the vehicles which had been abandoned in order to prevent their use by the enemy. Tactical air strikes destroyed 18 vehicles. <sup>154/</sup> The armored column reached FSB Alpha and remained there overnight. The 4th Armored Battalion (Composite) and the 11th Airborne Battalion joined the column on 21 March as it proceeded east. Helicopters lifted seven 105mm howitzers, four 155mm howitzers, one 3/4 and one 2 1/2 ton truck from FSB Alpha to Khe Sanh on 20 March and the 1st Airborne Brigade CP, 5th Airborne Battalion and personnel of two artillery batteries on 21 March. With the departure of the armored column FSB Alpha was closed. <sup>155/</sup>

**ALL UNITS IN CONTACT**

All South Vietnamese units were under attack by enemy forces on 20 March. The Marines holding the southern flank at FSBs Delta and Hotel were under such heavy indirect artillery fire that the helicopters could not effect resupply. Delta was under heavier attack than Hotel. To break it, eight Arc Light strikes were put in around the Delta perimeter, three on the south, two on the east and three on the west. Contact was temporarily broken. <sup>156/</sup>

The NVA 324B Division with at least two regiments, the 29th and 803d, attempted to smash the Marines and cut off the ARVN withdrawal down Route 9. However, the Marines held and inflicted heavy losses on the NVA. The 147th

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VNMC Brigade at FSB Delta reported that during the period from 1800H 19 March to 0600H 22 March, 1000 enemy soldiers were killed (400 by air strikes) and five captured while 85 Marines were killed and 238 wounded. <sup>157/</sup>

#### ARMOR IN TROUBLE

The Armored Task Force with its attached airborne units made its way toward FSB Bravo on 21 March. The column was attacked by a two-battalion-size enemy force at 1130H five kilometers west of the RVN-Laos border. The 7th and 11th Armored Cavalry Squadrons and the 8th Airborne Battalion were engaged by the attackers. The 6th Airborne Battalion joined in the battle which raged for seven hours. Tactical air strikes, helicopter gunships and U.S. artillery supported the ARVN units throughout the day. When contact was broken at 1830H, 32 ARVN soldiers had died, 135 were wounded and the destroyed vehicles included ten M41 tanks and 13 M113 armored personnel carriers. Faced with a road littered with damaged and destroyed vehicles, a culvert washed out and the threat of more ambushes, the Armored Task Force Commander chose to turn his column of 100 vehicles from the road and take an alternate route to the border. The task force, and its airborne screen spent the night near FSB Bravo. The enemy harassed the force intermittently during the night but the contacts were not serious. Three AC-130 gunships were employed with FACs and flareships throughout the night, to aid in fending off the attackers. <sup>158/</sup> In the morning the column reached the Xe Pon River but was unable to find a suitable ford. Bulldozers and engineering equipment, as well as POL, were delivered by helicopter on 22 March to facilitate the river crossing. To protect the column while

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it was stopped at the edge of the river, five airborne companies were deployed north of Route 9 towards the border and the 9th and 11th Airborne Battalions moved across the river and established positions to the east of it. 159/

At 1430H a FAC reported sighting an estimated 20 enemy tanks located eight kilometers west of the rear of the ARVN column. Five minutes later a second FAC confirmed nine enemy tanks moving east on Route 9 at about 30 miles per hour. He requested tactical fighters and shortly thereafter a pair of F-100s engaged the lead tank, then only five kilometers from the friendly armored task force. The fighters were equipped with close air support ordnance "snake and nape" (MK 82, 500 pound, high drag bomb; and BLU-27, napalm). This initial set of F-100s delivered its ordnance on two T-54 tanks without results. The second set of F-100s came on station and the FAC directed them on to the lead tank, a T-54. The number one fighter missed the tank on his first pass and the number two F-100 took heavy automatic weapons fire and crashed. The lead F-100 made a second pass, destroying the tank with a direct hit. This attack was immediately followed by another flight of F-100s that destroyed a second T-54. The third T-54 hit a land mine and was immobilized. It was then struck by an F-100 flight and destroyed. 160/

The rest of the tanks (PT-76s) dispersed and headed for cover. However, two PT-76 tanks were destroyed by an F-4 flight before reaching a safe haven. The threat to the retreating ARVN column had been temporarily thwarted.

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The Armored Task Force continued its engineering efforts to prepare a crossing site at the Xe Don River. However, the site was not ready at nightfall so the column of vehicles remained on the west bank of the river through the night. There was no contact with the enemy during the hours of darkness. At 0630H on 23 March, all the vehicles had crossed the river and were rolling east to the border. Link-up of the Armored Task Force with elements of the U.S. 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry (Mech) took place at 0915H. The ARVN 1st Armored Brigade crossed back into the Republic of Vietnam 43 days after it had left with only 89 vehicles (22 M41 tanks, 54 M113 armored personnel carriers, seven M-106 water trailers, two M125 heavy cargo trucks, three M548 light recovery vehicles and one D-2 bulldozer).<sup>161/</sup> But, it had evaded with the help of tactical air the disaster planned for it by the Communists. From 19 March to 23 March, tactical air strikes destroyed or severely damaged 30 enemy tanks.

The 1st Airborne Division and the 1st Armored Brigade were home again. The 1st Ranger Group and 1st Infantry Division were already out thus, only the six battalions of Marines and the stragglers remained in Laos. As the ARVN units returned to Quang Tri Province (Lam Son East), they deployed to engage enemy forces in the Republic of Vietnam in the remaining days of Operation Lam Son 719.

#### ALL OUT BUT THE STRAGGLERS

While the Armored Task Force was wending its way towards the border, the 147th VNMV Brigade at FSB Delta was in a desperate fight against enemy tanks and infantry. Its three battalions with nine 105mm howitzers were



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surrounded by the enemy and in continuous contact from 21 through 23 March. Forty tactical air sorties were flown in a two-and-one-half-hour period (0725H-1006H) on 22 March.<sup>162/</sup> Poor visibility and low ceilings prevented any more sorties until midafternoon. Evening ground fire was too intense for helicopter resupply or medical evacuation. During the night of 22-23 March USAF flareships and gunships were on station over FSB Delta but did not fire because of uncertainty as to the Marine positions.<sup>163/</sup> In the early morning hours the brigade moved off FSB Delta to a position on the ridge three kilometers northeast of Delta. The Marines destroyed their remaining artillery at the fire support base before departing to find a suitable pick-up zone for helicopter extraction. From 1100H to 1300H 12 tactical air strikes struck FSB Delta to destroy the ammunition and kill enemy soldiers. Extraction of the 147th VNMC Brigade began at 1400H on 23 March but enemy antiaircraft fire became too heavy by 1453H to continue the lift. Four hundred thirty Marines (of whom 200 were wounded) had been extracted by the time the lift was suspended.<sup>164/</sup> The remainder of the brigade moved east towards FSB Hotel to join with the 258th VNMC Brigade defending that position. Both brigades were helilifted out from FSB Hotel on 24 March. All units were out of Laos by 1735H.<sup>165/</sup>

The 44 days of fighting cost the South Vietnamese 1118 killed, 4081 wounded and 209 missing. The ARVN estimate of the enemy's losses show 13,341 killed (4126 killed by air) and 51 captured. More than 8,000 tactical air strikes were flown by all the air services involved in the campaign.<sup>166/</sup> The campaign was a stringent test by fire of the South Vietnamese fighting

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ability, helicopter mobility in the battle zone and USAF striking power in close air support of ground forces.

LAM SON EAST

The U.S. Forces in Quang Tri Province who protected the allied LOC and provided the logistical support for the Vietnamese troops in Laos had a very busy 44 days. The Communist B5 Front made a concerted effort to disrupt the flow of supplies and equipment down Route 9. The difficulties in constructing and maintaining landing strips at Khe Sanh for the C-130s forced the U.S. Army to transport more of the material by truck convoy than had been planned. These convoys were lucrative targets for enemy ambushes. These ambushes occurred on a daily basis despite the efforts of the mobile combat teams fielded by the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry to screen the route.

Every combat support base (Dong Ha, Quang Tri, Khe Sanh and Da Nang) and all the fire support bases received mortar, rocket and sapper attacks. The frequency and severity of these attacks appear to have coincided with the ebb and flow of the NVA offensives in Lam Son West (Laos). The most severe attacks were directed at Khe Sanh. It received daily mortar and rocket attacks beginning on 19 March. Four attacks by fire, including 59 rounds of 122mm artillery, hit Khe Sanh on 21 March killing two U.S. soldiers, destroying the primary control tower and damaging the landing strips sufficiently to close the field. A sapper attack made under cover of an artillery barrage on 22 March killed three Americans and wounded 13. Two helicopters